

## MASS FATALITIES

Considerations from Religions of  
the World

### Basic Considerations

- Importance of maintaining personal identity
- Consideration for the concerns of family members of the deceased
- Responding to the variety of religious concerns while dealing with the necessities of the event itself
- Being prepared to defend decisions made while exhibiting compassion for the religious concerns of persons related to the victim.

### Religious Variety



### Religious Variety



### Religious Varieties



### Globalization and Religious Ritual

- Religious rituals carry meaning, relate those participating to the sacred, may form the basis for day-to-day life, and may serve as a source of identity.
- Secularization is often a tendency to view the world in nonreligious terms and remove modern institutions from the dominance of religion.
- However, the interaction between religion and secularism is complicated; and often national rituals can be seen as quasi-religious celebrations.
- As religion cannot be ignored – even by the determined atheist – as a powerful social force throughout the world, so ritual cannot be ignored for the power it has in both secular and religious societies to unite people and express their highest ideals.
- While true that religion is more than ritual, ritual is still one of the deepest and most visible forms of religions.

## Hinduism

- The law of *Karma* states the principle that people reap what they sow. This principle of justice requires that every thought or deed – good or bad – counts in determining how a person will be born in the next life on earth.
- The permanent soul changes bodies just as a person changes worn out clothes.
- Hinduism encourages a variety of beliefs and practices; which yields freedom to develop manifold expressions of faith and action.
- In essence, the body that we see is only one chapter in a volume of a whole set of books on the life of a soul, or *Atman*.

## Hinduism

- Krishna playing the flute



## Jain Temple



## Hinduism, cont.

- The problem for humans is the immortality of the soul – which is also ultimately the solution.
- The ideal for Hindus is harmony with the Absolute; harmony is overcoming life's polar tensions.
- Funerals, *antyeshti*, are the last rites observed by almost all Hindus. Although a few may be buried, most are cremated.
- The eldest son of the deceased is usually the one who performs the rites. As you can imagine – maintaining an identity trail becomes extremely important.
- Since reincarnation is the continuation of the existence of the immortal soul, the soul must be freed.

## Hinduism, cont.

- Cremations can occur sometime after death – in some cases months may pass. This celebration is not sad.
- The cremation – whenever it occurs – helps transform the body back to basic elements and allows the soul to move onward in the cycle of rebirths, and ultimately to release.
- However, the cycle is to be continued – allowed to run its course – until it is completed. Therefore, anything that prevents the cycle's continuation toward completion is seen in the most negative terms. The handling of bodies needs to allow for the eventual completion by remaining family members if at all possible.

## Hinduism, concluded

- When someone dies, the family, out of love, wishes to perform all the rites carefully and ensure that the soul goes to its best possible rebirth.
- Some Hindus believe that cremation is to be completed before sundown. It is generally believed that the soul is released when the skull bursts.
- The cremated remains are to be collected so that the after-death rituals can be completed as well.
- If the cremation has to occur without family, the remains should be identified and maintained for the surviving family so that the mourning rituals can also be done.

## Indigenous Religions

- First let me say that I am not covering Native American Tribal practices – I believe that will be covered in another segment.
- Indigenous religions generally exist within holistic cultures in which every object and act may have religious meaning. Fortunately today, the term “primitive” is seldom used to describe either the religions or their practices.
- Since so much of indigenous religion is not yet written down and relies upon oral tradition, it is often helpful to consider what many scholars refer to collectively as “sacred paths” that share common elements.

## Indigenous religions, cont.

- Most indigenous religions have sprung from tribal cultures whose survival has required a cautious and respectful relationship with nature.
- Oglala Sioux shamans when asked about what was *wakan* (“holy,” “mysterious”), said, “Every object in the world has a spirit and that spirit is *wakan*.”
- All of these religions have a respect for origins, gods, and ancestors.
- Life-cycle ceremonies are common to all. As the final passing from this life, death is accompanied by rituals that serve to comfort close relatives, assist the spirit of the dead person in moving on, and protect the living from bad influences that could come from an unhappy spirit.

## Indigenous religions, cont.

- For this conference I’ve decided to look at three African religions within the indigenous category as being fairly representative of the category: Basongye of the Congo, Zulu peoples of South Africa, and the Yoruba peoples also of South Africa.
- Life beyond death is one of the important themes for these religions. The body remains behind, but the soul moves on to reward or punishment in a world beyond this one. Ancestors live in another sphere, but their powers can influence the community now.
- It is important for those of us from primarily Western influences to remember that the community aspects of indigenous religions usually take precedence over individual needs or desires.

## Basongye

- This people are farmers, and supplant their crops through fishing and hunting.
- Inanimate things do not have spirits, nor do animals. A human body consists of body, spirit, shadow, and perhaps a conscience. The essential part is spirit, which can be incarnated up to three times. Happy ancestors can send a human spirit back to its family as a child.
- The body has no will of its own – only the spirit has a will/understanding.
- There is a wide spread and very involved system of magic that influences daily life. Any kind of magic or power costs human lives.
- Ancestors and spirits can influence daily living – therefore sacrifices and attention are paid to them regularly.

## Zulu

- Sacred spaces and souls are sources of power. Ancestors are souls who sought to fulfill their moral obligations. This people incorporate herbalists much more than many of the others as separate from shamans or their equivalents.
- Death is threatening to the community. Ancestors (souls) are “brought home” with a special rite which returns the ancestor’s spirit to its rightful place within the family community or “kraal.”
- During mourning, all rites are to be performed carefully so that the ancestor or other forces do not turn against the kraal community. The death of a chief subjects the entire community to potential harm.
- Once again, we can see that the identity trail for fatalities is very important. The seriousness for people cannot be overemphasized.

## Yoruba

- There are many Yoruba people studying all over the world. They have a developed society made up of Christians, Muslims, and native Yoruba religions. The basic unit is the household and is male dominated – next are the village, town, and major cities.
- This people believe that their fates were determined at creation. Humans have forgotten their fates, but can recapture them through divination.
- Ancestors again can have a profound influence, and can be reached through meditation practices.
- Among this people, physically unfortunate people are considered sacred.
- Once again, rites of passage are considered very important. The body is temporary and the soul is permanent. Proper performance of rites is expected to guarantee good treatment for the community.

## Buddhism

- There are as many Buddhists, globally, as Protestant Christians with 98% living in Asia.
- Death rituals throughout Buddhism are a key time when monks expound core teachings and receive contributions.
- Mourners dispose of the corpse, relying on ritual to ensure that the person does not become a "hungry ghost" or "demon."
- There is a duality that seems to make it possible for good ritual to overcome at least some aspects of bad karma. However, this is to be done during dying and/or immediately following death.
- The tradition's dependence on after death ritual service for sangha donations is evident in modern Asian traditions, even when people are otherwise hardly observant – death rituals performed by Buddhist clergy endure.

## Buddhism

- Buddha



## Buddhism concluded

- In theory there is nothing to carry over from one life to the next. Yet, Buddha believed in samsara. Unless humans cease all grasping in this life, something carries over. A consciousness of former existence or a personal identity is not what carries over; what does is an individual's moral impact in personal and social life.
- Mahayana Buddhism had great success in China, Korea and Japan because it was concerned with the life of the person after death. The body might be buried or cremated, but the person may retain identity as an ancestor in a spiritual realm.

## Islam

- Islam is the second largest religion in the world, and the fastest growing at the moment; approx. 1.25 billion.
- The word "Islam" means submission or surrender. A Muslim is one who submits, who seeks to follow and actualize God's will in history; both as an individual and a member of a worldwide community.
- Islam is one of the three Abrahamic faiths along with Judaism and Christianity.
- Islam has had its share of diversity in ritual and practice over the years.
- The funeral ritual for Muslims is marked by its simplicity. Verses from the Qur'an are recited for the dying person, and after death the body is buried in a plain white shroud. The face of the deceased is turned toward Mecca at the burial.
- Muslims believe in resurrection and life in either paradise or hell.
- The importance of turning the face toward Mecca, the white shroud, and maintaining identity for the surviving family members is as important for Muslims as for any other religion.

## Mecca - Islam

- Hajj



## Judaism

- Samson and the lion



## Torah Scroll



## Judaism

- Main beliefs are: one God – formless, all knowing and eternal; the words of the prophets are meaningful; God gave the Law to Moses; the Messiah – a savior sent by God – will come someday; there will be a resurrection of the good “in the world to come.”
- Once again, Jewish death rites are quite simple. The dying person is encouraged to say a prayer of confession, asking for forgiveness from sins and healing if possible, and asking – if this is the hour of death – that the death serve as atonement for all her/his sins. The prayer ends with a request, “Grant me a share in the world to come” and “protect my beloved family.”
- After death, the body is buried the same day or the next without embalming. The community places the body in the ground with prayers binding the soul of the deceased to the Eternal One.

## Judaism concluded

- If death is immanent, the individual needs to know that; it is ideal for the dying person to recite the Shema – a special acknowledgement of relationship with God prior to death.
- Judaism meets this occasion as with many others in life with ritual that reinforces identity with the community of believers. Believers both in the present and those who have gone before. This recapture of traditional relationship is very important for the deceased as well as the surviving family members.
- Since embalming is generally prohibited and burial is so quick – special consideration may very well apply.

## Christian Art

- Holy Spirit



## Christianity

- Christianity is currently the largest of the world religions.
- As with many of the major religions, there are many diverse paths a believer can follow.
- Dying Christians are encouraged to make a final confession of sins and to receive forgiveness so they can enter death with a clear conscience.
- Death is a part of God’s plan, and those who have lived a Christian life have hope of spending eternity in fellowship with God.
- With that understood, there are varieties of post death practice that depend upon denominational tradition and personal preference.
- Burial has been common although cremation has gained popularity.
- Embalming is usual but not totally accepted.

## Christian practice

- Some denominations still prepare the deceased body at home, usually by the women of the family.
- In the United States funeral homes usually handle the arrangements for the deceased, with significant family input.
- If there has been a significant trauma to the body, or the body is unavailable, funeral services can often use urns for remains, or, in the absence of the body, a collage of pictures may be used a part of a memorial service.
- Many people who profess Christianity come from varied religious backgrounds so that customary funeral practice varies significantly from family to family.
- There are general guidelines that may be common, but how the deceased life is memorialized is primarily a function of family decision.

## Mesa, AZ Temple

- LDS Temple in Mesa



## Conclusions

- There are many other religious possibilities that exist. Jains and Sikhs are outgrowths from Hinduism. Shintoism, Confucianism, and Wicca have a great many adherents around the world. Additional considerations abound.
- However, we can say that the vast majority of religious practices can be adapted to circumstances when personal identity trails can be verified and protected.
- As I reviewed information generated from review of the handling of tsunami victims in December of 2004, a number of items stand out that are of concern in any context dealing with mass fatalities.
- Over 200,000 people died, and the handling of bodies was inconsistent. There were four areas covered in the report from which I quote: how the bodies were recovered, how they were disposed of, how identified, and the health effect of the number of bodies on survivors. Interestingly, the large number of bodies did not cause significant problems for the health of survivors.
- The goal of the study was to generate recommendation for use in future disasters.
- The importance of establishing reliable identities for victims became a major recommendation.

## Conclusions

- One concern was the number of agencies involved and the lack of coordination between them – Indonesia had 42 different organizations involved in recovering bodies. I guess that's why many of you are here!
- Methods for identification varied widely. Some areas relied upon photos, temporary burial in shallow graves – where the temperature is lower than in the ambient air – with the intention of exhuming the bodies later for identification, but many bodies were beginning to decompose quickly which created major problems. Some hospitals combined photos with sex, age, weight, and personal effects. In those cases 87% of the bodies were successfully identified.

## Considerations

- Religious perspectives may vary widely, but it is essential that they be acknowledged. What happens to the essential, eternal nature of individuals matters to the individual, the family, and in many cases to the community as a whole.
- When protocols evolve, science and efficiency must address religious implications, too. While it is well known that the circumstances are not likely to be optimum for maintaining all considerations, we need to try.
- An articulated effort to identify and protect individual autonomy will go a long way toward lessening dissatisfaction with the handling of any disaster.